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November 5, 2017

Cross Country Reflection

Cross country has shown me how to play a leadership role, be respectful, be disciplined and has helped me find joy. There has been so much change in my life throughout my high school cross country career.

Senior year, I was named one of the captains of the cross country team. At the start of freshman year and even up until junior year, that is a position I never thought I would be in. Coming onto the team as a freshman, I didn't know a lot of people. I had been one of two girls on my 8th grade cross country team so I was used to being independent. Many people would say that I was a very quiet freshman and I rarely talked. Looking back, I only remember going to two pasta parties total and not really being able to enjoy myself. I never had good workouts and usually ended up running alone or in the back of runs. Let's just say I was not a leader in any way. I have always envisioned captains or leaders on the team as very vocal, outgoing, and people that you can look up to based off their athletic successes. I still agree that these are traits a captain or leader can have; however, those aren't the only ones. I still define myself as a very composed person. I've learned that one way to lead with this trait is to lead by example. When I say lead by example, I don't mean based off of running ability, I mean attitude. As a freshman I went into workouts with a visible bad attitude and managed to express it throughout. Maybe not verbally, but I gave off a bad energy based off of other things like posture or facial expressions. Today, I am able to go into workouts with a better mindset knowing that it can affect everyone around me. I feel also that instead of being vocal toward the whole team at once, it is easier for someone like me, and more meaningful for me to have personal conversations with people at different times. I have found different ways for myself to develop a new leadership role.

Freshman and Sophomore year especially, I didn't have respect for the sport. I never considered myself a cross country athlete even though I had done it for years. Freshman year, my mom bribed me to join cross country by letting me get my ears pierced. If the rule for wearing jewelry during races didn't change my freshman year, I would not have been on the team. The only thing I had to do after my ears were pierced was show up to practice. I had no real goals for myself and the only expectation my mom had for me at the time was to show up. I didn't have any real connection to the sport and didn't really make an effort to bond with my team. By the time the season was over, it was known throughout the team that I would not be coming back as a sophomore. I knew that if I joined sophomore year, people would wonder why I came back. Not only did I not see a reason to come back at the time, but I didn't really give my team a reason to want me back either. Then, sophomore year came and my best friend joined the team. I had a hard time making friends the year before and she wanted me to do it with her so I decided to sign up again. People already knew that I didn't like cross country and so that definitely affected the way people reacted to me being back. By disrespecting their sport, I was also disrespecting them. It wasn't until a few weeks into the season my junior year I decided to take cross country seriously. I began to express my joys in cross country and never talked about my unnecessary negative thoughts. I saw how much the team meant to each other and I

wanted to be a part of that. My senior year was the first year I joined cross country on my own. I wasn't bribed, asked or forced. I approached the sport with a respectful attitude and was able to achieve so much more with my whole team than ever before.

Looking back, I did not have much discipline as a freshman or sophomore. Like I said before, I never accepted being a distance runner. Honestly, I even had a hard time considering myself a middle distance runner. I saw myself as a sprinter. When it came to workouts, I never did the full thing. I did half at most. It wasn't that I wasn't capable, it was that I was stubborn and didn't want the coaches to think I wanted to be a distance runner. In the moment, I didn't think that I was being stubborn. There would be rumors that I didn't try and that I was lazy, but I didn't see that in myself. Looking back I know that the effort was not truly there. When I went to cross country, it was me just going through the motions. Senior year was the first year I didn't run a single modified/shortened workout. My long runs went from five miles as a freshman to twelve miles as a senior. When you put in effort, you will begin to see changes in your physical abilities and your overall mentality.

I have never experienced so much emotion until my senior year. I truly love each of my teammates and coaches. I used to be the girl who would be confused or "weirded out" when someone would cry about things like loving their team or loving cross country. Now, I am that girl. I have become so close to my teammates and I love coming to practice just to see them. I have always had such amazing teammates throughout my entire high school career, I just didn't see it at the right time. My team has given me so much joy, I honestly don't know where I would be without them. I have never felt so comfortable with people and they have all helped me become a better person. They are truly a family to me. They have accepted me through all of my flaws and I look up to every single one of them. My coaches have shaped me into a better athlete, but especially a better person. Not only do my coaches and team support me in athletics but they support me in everyday life.

Cross country is one of the best decisions I have made in my life, even though it wasn't always my decision. I have learned and experienced so much. I cannot thank the team enough and I know that I will bring a piece of everyone with me throughout the rest of my life.

Dear Girls,

To be honest, I don't really know how to approach this letter. I've been thinking about it for a while, and when nothing came up, I just decided, "hey. Just spill out onto the page and go". I guess this is what I'm doing, so apologies if it gets rambly at times.

When I was a kid, running in high school wasn't something I necessarily something I saw myself doing. I didn't hate running, but I wasn't a super big fan of it. The only real memory I have of actually doing something like cross country or track was in 4th grade, when we had our field day at the end of the school year. I remember that I was running part of a medley, and that my shoe fell off halfway around the gravel track. It's sorta funny thinking back on this, and how the exact same thing would happen almost 6 years later.

It wasn't until I entered middle school did I start to run more regularly. Now would also be a good time to clarify that I grew up in New Mexico, and attended 6th and 7th grade at a private school. The first week of my 6th grade year, I signed up to join the cross country team, because why not. When I first arrived, I found that I was the slowest person there, and not by a matter of seconds. The only other kid in my grade who ran had a mile PR of 7:45, and I was proud of my 15:00 mile. For the first two years of my running career, I struggled with the weight of being the slowest person on the team. I won't lie, there were plenty of times where I wanted to quit, and where I felt like running just wasn't for me, but something in my head just told me to keep trying, to keep pushing onwards.

The end of my 6th grade year and the entirety of my 7th grade year were pretty rough, I'm not going to lie. In April of 2012, one of my closest friends committed suicide, and as a child who hadn't really been exposed to death before, it was a traumatizing experience. To top it off, I found out in October of that year that my parents were planning on moving our whole family before the start of 8th grade. I immediately hated the idea of moving, mainly because life in New Mexico was all I had ever known, and I was perfectly content staying there. My parents and I fought a lot during this time period, and with friend issues weighing on my mind, I found that running was one of the few things I could do where I didn't have to worry about parents or friends.

We ended up moving to Illinois in June 2013, and it was one of the hardest experiences of my life. I was basically leaving my childhood friends, family, and team for a new life in a state I had no interest in visiting, let alone living in. My first summer in Illinois was a quiet one, as I stayed home and brooded in my room.

With the start of 8th grade my parents encouraged me to join the cross country team at Murphy Junior High, and I begrudgingly agreed. I had enjoyed running in New Mexico, and I shouldn't give up something I loved just because I lived in a new part of the country. Let me tell you, making the transition from running in New Mexico to running in Illinois was NOT an easy switch at all (let me tell you, changing altitudes and running in humidity for the first time was an experience I won't be able to forget).

Cross country in 8th grade was ok, I guess. I improved some, and I was happy with my performance, but it was sort of isolating coming to a team where a good majority of the girls on the team knew each other from elementary school. While I don't think they tried to purposefully exclude me, it still was rough, being the only kid who didn't know anybody else. By the end of 8th grade cross country, I wasn't sure if I wanted to keep running on a team, if this is what being on a team was like. 8th grade year passed very similarly, and it was a lonely time in my life. I didn't have many friends, and the friends that I did have weren't really interested in running.

The summer before 9th grade I debated about whether or not if I wanted to keep running. Eventually I decided that I could try it out for one year, and if I didn't like it, then I didn't have to do it anymore.

Freshman year cross country was awesome. That's probably the only way to describe the shift from middle school to high school. On the team, I made friends with a lot of different people who I probably never would have connected with in the first point. For a socially awkward, shy teenager, being part of the team that actually cared about each other was sort of a radical friends. Some of the first friends I made after moving to Illinois were on that team freshman year, and I'm still friends with most of them today.

High school running also greatly helped me improve my actual running. Over the course of the season, I went from someone who could run a 9:50 mile to someone who could run a 6:21 mile. Heck, I even got second in a race once, and that wasn't something that I don't even think was remotely possible from when I was in middle school. By the end of freshman cross country, I was sold.

Sophomore year was even better than freshman year, and with the arrival of the new freshman, we became even closer than before. I met some of the best people I know that year, and the friendships I made this year are some I hope to keep long beyond high school.

This year also brought many new PR's and milestones. First off, I broke 6 minutes for the first time ever, which is still something I'm in awe of today. I

also broke 21 minutes in the three mile, which is again something I'm still incredibly proud of. And finally, let's not forget the XC conference that year, when I lost my shoe halfway through the race, and ran the last mile and a half with one shoe on and one sock on.

Junior year was difficult. Family issues and the fact that I couldn't run for a good majority of the season was really rough. For a long time, running was a coping mechanism for me to cope with some of the anxiety and depression I had, and without being able to run, I felt like I had lost a piece of me. Even though this year was rough on me personally, it was still incredible to see how close the team grew. Even though I couldn't actually run, being a part of a team that was so committed to success and to getting better was inspiring.

And now here we are. The end of senior year. I'll admit, this wasn't my best year personally, but I can say without a doubt that this was the best team I've ever been on, and the best team that the program has had ever. To be honest, I don't even know how to describe the chemistry that this team had, and how that helped us succeed what we did. I feel like this year we stopped being a team, and started being more of a family.

I don't have much longer to type this, so I guess the rest of this letter will just be some advice I have to future teams. First things first, the fact that you've made it this far is incredible. I know that while on the team, it's natural to compare yourself to others, but the fact that you've made it this far is astounding. It takes something special to be a distance runner, and it takes something special to be on a team like this.

Second, don't let fear keep you from reaching your potential. There are so many times during the season or in races where I felt like I could have gotten up and caught somebody, yet the fear of failing made me not reach that potential. That's probably one of the biggest regrets I have when it comes to my running.

Finally, enjoy it. Enjoy every moment you spend with your team, whether it be in between strides, in the weight room, or on a long run. Enjoy every rep, every set, every mile you run and every step you take. Treasure the early mornings and late nights you spend with your teams, and love every single minute of it.

Alright. I really gotta go now, whoops. Just remember to run with brains in your head, love in your heart, and confidence in your feet.

Love,

Maddie :)

Running for Fun

It's hard to believe that I've spent 7 years of the 18 running for fun. There was something about the way you feel when you are able to surpass any limits you thought you had, that made running so rewarding. I've always looked at racing as somewhat of a metaphor life. How nothing about it is ever as easy as you think it's going to be. No matter how much you prepare, you'll never truly be ready for everything that is going to be thrown at you. Sometimes the one little thing that you didn't think mattered, can affect the bigger picture.

Running itself is difficult enough, having the time and energy to balance it with work and school was a whole new challenge. I had to learn to be so much more self sufficient and smart with time management. It gave me an idea of how stressful and busy you get when you become a real adult. But I knew that no matter how difficult it got to deal with everything, I could turn to running to clear my mind and my teammates to make me laugh. It's difficult to even imagine what my life would have been like had I not decided to go out for cross country; all the people I would have never met, and all the hilarious and beautiful moments that wouldn't have taken place. Some days coming to practice was the last thing that I wanted to do, so I began to fill out the google doc and include how I felt mentally before and after practice on a scale of 1-10. Nearly every day that I had a low rating mentally before the workout/ run it would increase afterwards. There's something about being around so many amazing people and the rush of adrenaline you get that helps clear your mind and think more positively. It's definitely not an easy task to be spending so much time and energy at practice, but it isn't suppose to be easy. That's kinda the point.

Spending countless hours on practices, long runs and meets, you really start to get close with the people you're spending so much time with. The people I have met through this sport are some of the kindest, funniest, most beautiful people I have come to know and love. If I could stay and spend more time with everyone I wouldn't hesitate to stay. The kind of relationships that are built are unlike any other. No other friends will be willing to run 10+ miles and voluntarily spend hours talking to you while doing so. Occasionally you just get lost in what you're saying and before you know it you've told this other person basically your whole life story possibly only having met them a couple months prior. The team is so inviting and friendly, you don't have to worry about what you should and shouldn't tell one another because they accept you for who you are. I've loved being a part of the team more than anything else throughout the entirety of high school. These people are what I will miss the absolute most about being at Oswego East.

- Alyssa Nepereny

Isabella Gyori's Letter

Cross Country has made a huge imprint in my life. As a freshman, I would have never pictured myself running mile repeats in the rain, wiping out on the ice, being chased by neighborhood dogs, or given the nickname 'numbnuts'. Luckily these both terrifying and fun experiences have been with my teammates right along with my side and will stick with me forever. Like most people, I started off as shy, following the crowd, and was clueless on how Cross Country actually worked up until last year. Now I am one of the captains, and I am a part of Oswego East's first State team! If I were to summarize what I have gained from my past seasons of Cross Country, it would be Hard work, Staying Focused, and Believing in myself.

Work. One simple word that is easier said than done. Six days a week, before and after school, we work hard. Every year, before the season even starts, we begin our training. As we approach track season, we continue to train. With countless hills, repeats, and long runs, we get in the habit of working hard. Without each other or without our great coaches, it would have been nearly impossible to work this hard and have achieved what we have accomplished. It takes every team member's commitment and effort to improve ourselves as well as the entire program. This amount of hard work couldn't have been possible without tons of sacrifice, dedication, and hard work.

Staying focused is not only applicable to running but is also a core value in life. I learned to not become distracted, block out negativity, and stay focused on improving myself. Paying attention to the little details and focusing on how to self-improve are valuable tools in life as well as in athletics. I have been reminded that the little things in life are the most important ones, and that is very true. Overcoming obstacles that may seem impossible now or are limiting, just requires staying focused. Before the season started, we all had one common goal- making it to State! Three years ago, I couldn't picture myself coming back to Peoria and stepping on the line as a State Qualifier, but it has taken years leading up to this one with non-stop focus, motivation, and hard work. Having the right drive and staying focused has brought our program to be better than ever.

It's true: if you believe you achieve. I have had trouble with self-confidence and believing in what I could do with the setbacks of injury and my plateau of performances. However, being around confident teammates that kept on encouraging me in every step of the way has not only helped me to push myself harder (whether I was on the elliptical or feeling self-doubt during a race), but it has helped me believe in myself and my abilities. So yes, when you believe you achieve!

It hurts to say that my last Cross Country season has come to an end. It is definitely a bittersweet feeling, but it's safe to say that it couldn't have ended any better. I am beyond blessed to have met many of my closest friends, trained by the best coaches, and have had the privilege of being a part of a team that has left some wonderful memories in my mind and heart. This sport and every single member has made a great imprint in my life which helps define who I am today.

What I've Gained These Past Four Years

Cross country has always been my favorite sport since I was a sixth grader. I loved the feeling of running fast and improving my time even if it was just by a couple seconds. I carried this passion over to my freshman year of high school, and have carried it throughout these past couple years. Passion was pretty much all I had when my first high school cross country season began.

Freshman year was when I learned what it meant to be dedicated to a sport. I learned how just working hard at practice wasn't enough to be the best runner I could be. I learned how crucial eating the right food, drinking enough water, and getting enough sleep each night was in order to run to the best of my ability. Learning all of these things got me to be in the top ten and be able to go down to Peoria and race. As a freshman I remember how excited and honored I felt to be given this opportunity. I honestly felt like I was an important part to the team, and I couldn't wait to show my team how hard I had worked for this spot. Although later on in the season, after the conference race, I learned that even when I wasn't racing anymore that it was still important to come to practice everyday and work just as hard to make sure I was being the best teammate I could be in order to do my part for the team. I learned what it meant to be a teammate in a high school sport. It means showing up to every practice knowing what your job is and then doing that job day in and day out. I learned how cross country was a team sport and not an individual sport. Running as a pack was something that was enforced since day one, and you're never able to push yourself as much unless your teammates are pushing themselves just as hard right next to you. My freshman year gave me my foundation of what I needed to know to be the most successful athlete I could.

Sophomore year and junior year too, was when I learned that it was okay to not be on varsity, and that it was okay to feel like everyone who I used to run faster than was starting to run faster than me. I learned that even though I would try my best it didn't mean that I would do my best.

Senior year was probably my worst season time and race wise but the best season overall. Senior year I learned how important friendship was, and I learned how you have to treasure all of the little moments at each practice and meet because my high school career has gone by too fast. I've gained a family from participating in this sport, and I'm forever grateful for the friendships I've made with each of the girls on the team. I learned that cross country doesn't always have to be about the sport or the times, but it's about being there for your teammates, believing one another, and loving each other. Every year I have been on this team, I have felt us become a closer and closer group. I truly loved seeing these girls every single day even if I wasn't looking forward to the workout or the race in particular. I learned that all the hard work and time I was putting into cross country wasn't just for me. Everything I was doing was for the team. Cross country is a really selfless sport, and you truly cannot do it without your teammates by your side. My senior year I was able to contribute in the making of school history and help the first girls

cross country team qualify for State. I couldn't be more proud of the team we became this season.

— Alexandra Dillman

Going into highschool I had been in cross country for one year and I was unsure if I should keep up with it. I enjoyed running and the sport but I didn't know if I was going to be good enough to run at the highschool level. My mom encouraged me to try it out for the first year and then decide whether to keep going or not after the season. The first day of summer training I remember watching the high schoolers go out for a 5 mile run. All I was thinking was I need to get to work. A 30 minute run seemed long for me, this was going to be a whole new level.

I'm very thankful I did run that summer because it got me ready for the season and for high school. Jumping into a new school as big as East wasn't going to be super easy for me. I was a very shy and quiet individual. The thought of crowds and big classes really made me nervous. Having the familiar faces in the hallways and upperclassmen on the team to answer my freshman questions helped relieve some of the stress. As the first weeks went on I started to get the hang of things academically and improved physically as well. Cross Country gave me a place to belong and fit in during this crazy time when everything was new and changing.

Cross Country takes everything you have: mentally, emotionally and of course physically. At times it can be nerve racking. When you are looking up that next hill, or staring down the course of your next race it's easy to count yourself out and find reasons to not give it 100%. You may be hurting, the workout might seem to be too hard, you may be so emotionally drained that you can't get yourself to start but cross country teaches you how to overcome these nagging thoughts. It teaches you that no matter what you have what it takes to succeed and keep on going.

Cross Country has taught me that my mind is the most powerful tool I have. Being mentally tough can push you not only in workouts but also in life. When things get tough your success depends on how you react to that situation. A positive outlook can keep you motivated to keep going while a negative one can stop you dead in your tracks. Staying positive allows you to open doors to keep on improving and building yourself up. May it be while I'm training to run faster or working to improve my career many obstacles can get in the way. Seeing these as only a temporary road block instead of a crushing blow that will stop me from ever reaching my goal allows me to be much more successful than counting myself out when things get a bit difficult. All of this is controlled by my mind and how I view the world around me. Cross taught me to never count myself out and let my mind defeat me before I even start. If I think I can do it then I will. Or I'll at least make an attempt that will teach me something in the end.

Cross Country has also opened the door for me to meet some of the best people I ever could. My team has been there to support me and push me day in and day out. When I have a bad day I know I could count on them to pick me up. When I need a laugh I know there will be someone there to crack a joke. The friendships and memories I made on the team are ones that I will hold for a lifetime. It taught me how to work together with others and how to be apart of a team. I've learned to put the team before myself and give it my all because I have people depending on me to perform to the best of my abilities. Knowing this pushed me to do things I never thought I could and the success we all achieved because we were all willing to put the

team first shows just how important teamwork is. Plus also shows how amazing the group of girls I got to work with really are.

Cross also taught me how to deal with injury, pain and recovery. Facing injury was one of the most difficult things I've done. It hurt me not only physically but also mentally. All I wanted to do was run. I just wanted to be out there with my team and be contributing to make it better. Instead I was stuck in a cross training room staring at a wall for an hour. Even when I thought it was better, again it would come back to bite me. Sometimes it was hard to keep going, to keep trying to fix it when nothing seemed to work. Although I kept trying to get better and learned valuable lessons. I learned how to take care of my body and stay positive. I learned how important recovery is both mentally and physically. Most of all I learned how to stay strong when faced with pain.

Cross taught me the value of hard work. Many people are born with natural talent for something. They do very well and are very successful. Although if they never work harder to improve they quickly can be passed up by someone who is working harder than them. I've learned that in order to improve and be the best you have to work hard all the time. If you want to be better you have to put in the work in order to get there. Running is great because anyone can be successful doing it. All they need is determination to work hard and be the best they possibly can be. Being in the sport for four years I learned what hard work is. I've learned that in order to reach the goals I set it's going to be hard. Although when you finally reach them in the end all of the hard work paying off is one of the most rewarding things imaginable. It's what makes all the work worth it in the end.

Looking back these past four years have been great. I've had amazing coaches and teammates. I've achieved my goals and built myself up both as an athlete and a person. I've learned lesson after lesson that can apply to not only running but also life in general. I'm so thankful for the sport and all that I've experienced throughout.

— Amanda Bonczkowski

Dear friend,

Why do you run?

That is a question all too familiar. Countless people have asked me that throughout my high school running career. I usually respond with something like *I dunno, cuz I love it*. But then I ask myself *Why do I love it?*

The answer to that question is a bit more complicated. I love to run because it makes me feel alive. I love the feeling of accomplishment after a killer workout. I love to run because it relieves my stress. I love runner's high. I love being part of team and feeling my teammates alongside me as we work towards our goals. I could go on and on. This letter is a reflection of my experience in the Oswego East cross country program. I hope you will find it inspiring as you strive to be your best self, both as a person and as an athlete.

For me, running is more than a sport; it's a lifestyle. It's engrained into who I am. Cross country means so much to me, and my teammates and coaches have become my best friends and my second family. The bond that cross country has cultivated between me and my teammates is one that cannot easily be broken. There is just something special about running together...suffering together through rain, snow, cold, heat...crying together and then celebrating together when it all pays off...nothing quite compares.

Throughout my high school cross country career, I have experienced both high and low moments. Being significantly injured at the end of my sophomore year made me question why I run.. why I do this to myself. Riding the elliptical for two hours is nothing short of miserable, and at times I thought of quitting. I thought I wasn't good enough or healthy enough to bear the intensity of training. But I kept going. I kept going, kept fighting, because I realized I was part of something bigger than myself. I was part of a team, and I was working for my teammates--my best friends--and I couldn't let them down. I fought through, and it was one of the best decisions of my life. The next year (my junior year), I found myself hyperventilating in the back of an ambulance after my conference race... devastated that I didn't reach my goal of making all-conference. But I kept going. I had made it too far to quit, and I wasn't about to give up on all the goals I had. Now, after my senior season, I can not only call myself an all-conference athlete, but also a part of a state qualifying team. Believe me, it's worth it.

So, I am here to tell you that whatever you face, whether it be a small injury or an unprecedented trip to the hospital, you have what it takes to push through. And if you do, you will not be disappointed. Now, as I look back, I am thankful for my setbacks and the lessons they taught me. I strongly believe that I wouldn't be who I am and I wouldn't have accomplished what I did without them. There really is such a thing as a blessing in disguise.

When someone asks me what it's like to race 3 miles, I explain, "It's basically deliberate torture." Anyone who has run cross country knows the feeling of legs burning like fire, lungs about to burst, heart racing, and seemingly every member of the body screaming for mercy. So why do we do it? For me, nothing compares to the feeling of pushing my body to the limit and beyond, and then watching it accomplish things I never thought possible. The feeling of complete and utter pain and exhaustion has become for me a medicine; I love it and I don't think I could live without it.

Being a part of Oswego East cross country has truly been one of the best experiences of my life. The lessons I have learned and the friendships I have built will last a lifetime. As I look back at my years of running, the things that stick out to me most are the small special moments shared with my teammates. Falling on the ice during a winter run, splashing in puddles while running in pouring rain,

dancing in the weight room, building towers with rollers, and joking around on the bus are only a few of the many memories I have. I realize that 40 years from now, when I look back upon my high school years, it won't matter how fast I ran at a certain meet, or how bad I was hurting during a workout...what will matter is the love and support I had from my teammates, and the memories we made together.

Out of all the core values that can be applied to distance running, I can identify three that have stuck out to me the most: joy, trust, and risk. As a distance runner, you must find joy in your sport in order to succeed. Finding this joy may take time and may come with experience as you grow in the sport, but if you approach your training with an open heart and a willingness to improve, joy will find you.

Trust is something that did not come to me right away. It took time for me to really trust myself, my teammates, and my training. Once I developed that trust, along with it came confidence, and that confidence was what spurred me to run my best. Allow yourself to trust your training, your teammates, your coaches, and most importantly, yourself; if you do, confidence will come, and the sky is your limit.

The concept of risk may sound intimidating, but it is probably the value that has impacted me the most. T.S. Eliot said, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far can go." I have experienced the reality of this quote throughout my cross country career, and I am here to encourage you to take the risk, push yourself to the breaking point, embrace the pain, and watch yourself accomplish amazing things as a result. At the end of the day, you will not regret taking that risk.

So...why do I run? I run because I love it. Why do I love it? I love it because it hurts then heals, challenges then gratifies, teaches then inspires, stresses then enlightens. For me, nothing in life quite compares to what running does for me. It's amazing how simply quickly putting one foot in front of the other can really do so much to your body, mind, and soul. My love for running has been encouraged and cultivated by my dedicated coaches and loving teammates. Truly, I wouldn't be where I am today (in running and in life) if it weren't for them. I owe so much to all of them. We have run as individuals, worked as a team, and finished as a family.

As I approach graduation and toe the line of a new start in college, my experience on the cross country team stands out as the most influential force of my high school years. I reflect on the past three years as part of the program and I am thankful for every minute of it. It went by way too fast, and although I am leaving, this isn't the end; the memories I have, the lessons I have learned, and the love I share with my teammates will be carried with me forever. The journey has been the reward, and I would do it all again.

—Kendra Standish